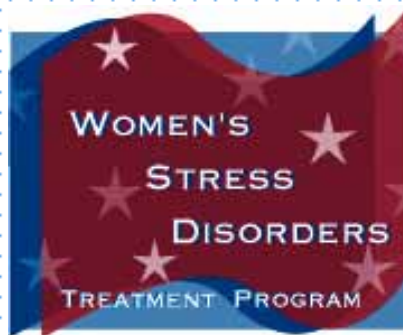
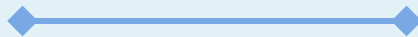


Coping with Chronic Pain



Women's Stress Disorders Treatment Program

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608-280-7084

General information about chronic pain:

- ◆ Treating pain is a very serious and complex issue. Of course, treatment of your problem with medications, physical therapy, and even surgery is important. It is just as important to know that pain affects more than just the body part(s) that hurt, but your entire life. Simple solutions rarely work.
- ◆ “Chronic pain” is defined as non-cancer pain that is long-lasting and disrupts how you are able to function.



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General information about chronic pain:

- ◆ How you cope with pain is very individual and might be different than someone else.
- ◆ The pain you feel is real, even if it might be hard for someone else to see it, understand it, or explain it.

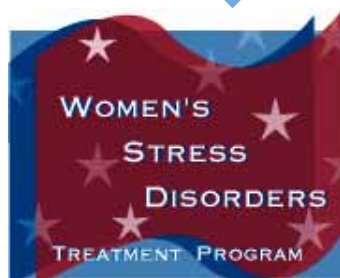


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***Living with chronic pain
can change who you are,
to some degree:***

- **It can change how you feel about yourself.** For example, you may have always been strong and athletic. Now you can't climb up and down a few steps. You may feel self-conscious about your appearance because you walk with a cane. Your body may change in other ways. You may gain or lose weight.
- **Your relationships may change.** You may no longer be invited to go bowling, dancing or skiing with your friends. You may not be able to drive your car and need help from friends or family. You may worry about becoming a burden. Chronic pain can effect romantic relationships to include sexual intimacy.

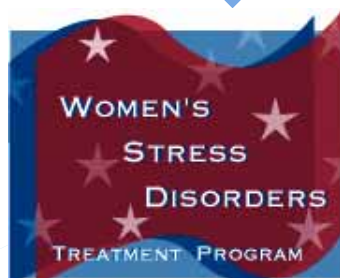


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***Living with chronic pain
can change who you are,
to some degree:***

- ◆ Your financial status may change. You may have problems working full time. Some may need to apply for a disability income, which is a very time consuming and emotionally draining process. You may need to change your spending habits. It may be hard to meet even basic expenses like food, shelter, etc.

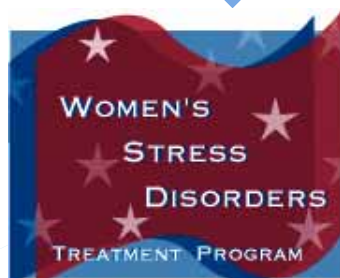


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***Think about the
changes in your life
due to chronic pain:***

- ◆ Physical limitations
- ◆ Changes in your body image
- ◆ Relationships with friends/family
- ◆ Independence
- ◆ Ability to do the activities you enjoy
- ◆ Roles in your family
- ◆ Job changes
- ◆ Financial status
- ◆ Lifestyle changes
- ◆ Other:



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These changes may make you feel sad.

You may need time to grieve these losses the same way you would the loss of a loved one. You might even feel depressed. It may help to see a therapist, for a time, and to use medications (antidepressants) prescribed by your doctor.

Knowing these changes and the sadness they bring to your life is an important first step in the process. Everyone deals differently with this sadness. Think about the way you dealt with another loss in your life and what helped. Talk to your doctor about getting the help of a therapist if you are struggling with this.

Grieving a loss takes a lot of your energy and affects your pain level!



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***Your feelings affect
your pain level.***

A leading expert in the area of pain control, Dennis Turk, describes a “biopsychosocial” method of pain management. He says it is not just the body part that hurts that affects your pain. Your emotions, your relationships, and the sum total of any other stress in your life affects your pain.



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Your feelings affect your pain level.

- ◆ Two people with the same physical problem may experience pain differently. Cultural factors, beliefs, attitudes, expectations about the pain, how you learned to deal with pain in your family, the sense of control you have in your life, your emotions, your unique personality characteristics, and other life stress will all have an impact on how you experience pain.
- ◆ The one thing to remember is that pain is very complex and involves more than just a physical explanation.



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Why include thoughts and feelings?

- ◆ One strategy often used to manage pain is cognitive - behavioral therapy. The general idea of the cognitive part of this therapy is that when you feel down it is important to notice the thoughts going through your head.
- ◆ Your thoughts are very powerful and affect the way you feel. For example, someone who has thoughts such as “I can’t stand this pain”, “I am worthless”, or “No one cares about me”, is bound to continue feeling worse.



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Why include thoughts and feelings?

- ◆ When you have these negative thoughts going through your head you will, no doubt, begin to feel stronger emotions. You might get angry, sad, lonely, fearful, etc.
- ◆ You may notice your pain level increases when you feel these emotions, or that you become less able to cope with the pain.



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Why include thoughts and feelings?

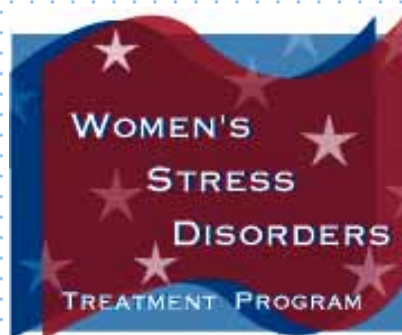
- ◆ **The idea is to change your thoughts in order to change how you feel. This sounds strange at first, but really works. For example, replacing the thought, “I can’t stand this” with “I can tolerate this and have done this before” will help.**
- ◆ **It does not actually make the pain go away but it helps you feel more in control and does not make the pain worse. If you tell yourself that you can’t stand the pain you will likely experience *greater pain* because of the additional anxiety generated by this negative thought.**



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An excellent book to read on how to do this is Feeling Good, The New Mood Therapy, by David Burns, M.D. Although this book is not specifically about pain management, it teaches you the basics of cognitive behavioral therapy. You may want to work with a therapist who is experienced in this method to help you practice these strategies.



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The behavioral part

- ◆ Remember we said cognitive-behavioral therapy. The behavioral steps you take are equally important in improving the effects of chronic pain on your mood.
- ◆ This part may include things such as relaxation practices, stretching, or focusing on staying within your optimal range of activity.



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Let's talk about your expectations...

- ◆ Most people who experience chronic pain just simply want it to stop! They want to go back to the way things were before the pain started. It may not be realistic to continue to expect this.
- ◆ Gather as much information as you can about your chronic pain condition. Talk to your medical treatment team about all your options for pain management. After you feel satisfied that you have tried everything, then talk to them about what you can realistically expect.



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Your expectations...

- ◆ Many people who live with chronic pain learn how to manage it so that they can have the *best life possible*. They have good days and bad days. They try not to overdo on their good days so that they lessen the number of bad days.
- ◆ In other words, they have learned to accept the ebb and flow of their chronic pain condition. They are no longer as frustrated, angry and depressed as they may have once felt. They no longer expect there to be something magical that will completely eliminate pain from their life.



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Your expectations...

Some people find the serenity prayer helpful:

"God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference"



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Your expectations...

- ◆ Take some time to think about your own expectations. Are they realistic?
- ◆ This does not mean you have to give up on your goals or dreams. A good example is the actor Christopher Reeve who played Superman. His spinal cord was severely damaged in a freak fall off of a horse and he now needs a wheel chair. He continues to hold onto his goal of someday walking. He knows that right now that is not possible, but is hopeful about the future. He continues to work to keep his body in the best shape possible.



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Living the Best Life Possible...

- ◆ Think about the things in your life that are *most important* to you. It might be spending time with your family and friends, volunteering at your church, etc. Try to devote your time and energy to the people and things in your life that you value the most.
- ◆ Spend more time each day focusing on the *things you can do* rather than your limitations. Take pleasure in the small things in life such as watching a beautiful sunset.



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Living the Best Life Possible...

Learn everything you can about your chronic pain condition and how to manage it. Try keeping a pain journal. (A sample pain journal is included on this web site) Ask a family member to do the same, and then, compare notes. You may discover clues to what helps your pain level. Talk to others who live with pain and find out how they manage.



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Living the Best Life Possible...

Join a Chronic Pain Support Group. You can find them at most hospitals or medical centers.

The Madison VA Hospital has a Pain Management Group that you are welcome to join. Call 608-280-7073 if you want to try it.



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Living the Best Life Possible...

- ◆ Keep an open mind about trying therapies recommended by your treatment team. For example, relaxation skills may help about 5-10%. Other therapies may help another 5-10% and before you know it your pain may be 20% better.
- ◆ Get the help of someone who is experienced in teaching these skills to make sure you are using the right techniques. Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists or Social Workers can often help.



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Living the Best Life Possible...

Make a commitment to give these other therapies a good try. For example, it may take 6-8 weeks of practicing relaxation skills before they start to make a difference. Good results take time and effort.



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The American Chronic Pain Association suggests these coping skills:

- ◆ Do not dwell on physical symptoms of pain
- ◆ Focus on abilities not disabilities
- ◆ Recognize and talk about your feelings about pain and the control it has over your life
- ◆ Use relaxation exercises to help ease the tension that increases pain and redirect attention away from pain and suffering
- ◆ Use mild stretching exercises daily if your doctor approves.
- ◆ Set realistic goals and evaluate them weekly. This helps you see that your desires can be achieved one step at a time.
- ◆ Recognize your basic rights to make mistakes, say no, and to ask questions.



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Remember...

- ◆ Chronic pain is very complex and there are rarely easy solutions.
- ◆ The American Chronic Pain Association says “Half the battle is won when you begin to help yourself”. Your pain management program should help you regain control of your life, reduce your suffering and enhance the quality and pleasure of your life.
- ◆ Be an active partner with your treatment team in developing the best pain management program for you.



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